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ABSTRACT

Reading with an awareness of intertextuality helps students respond in a dynamic manner to multicultural literature. Students explore themes of liberation and racism as they examine the connections, as well as the disjunctions, between two award-winning children's books. During the four 45-minute lessons, grade 3-5 students will: read and discuss multicultural literature in a meaningful, complex manner; become familiar with how genre and historical context are used to interpret texts; discover how to compare and contrast texts to uncover their intertextual links; develop ideas in verbal and written form; and learn how literature and art can be used to express inspiring visions of freedom and liberty. The instructional plan, lists of resources, student assessment/reflection activities, and a list of National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards addressed in the lesson are included. (RS)

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Flying to Freedom: *Tar Beach* and *The People Could Fly*

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Grade Band

3-5

Estimated Lesson Time

Four 45-minute sessions

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Overview

Comparing *Tar Beach* and *The People Could Fly* enables students to interpret themes of liberation and racism in a complex, multifaceted manner. Third- through fifth-grade students work in small discussion groups to compare and contrast the two texts and develop Venn diagrams. After the group discussions, student work individually to write a reflective essay. Moreover, by examining the relationship between two different types of narrative set in two different time periods, students learn about the significance of genre and historical context.

From Theory to Practice

Lehr, S. & Thompson, D.L. (2000) The dynamic nature of response: Children reading and responding to Maniac Magee and The Friendship. *The Reading Teacher, 53,* 480-493.

- Integrating the literature program with quality multicultural children's books is a necessary goal of an inclusive curriculum.
- This study found that children in both rural and urban settings were able to confront their confusion, their own prejudices, their lack of understanding, and their questions about racial problems in the United States.
- The teacher's role in the classroom setting is rather crucial during discussions of multicultural literature. If children are left to their own devices when reading and discussing multicultural books, there is the potential for a pooling of misinformation. As "cultural mediators," teachers can scaffold and extend the children's responses and fill in the historical gaps for children as questions and confusions arise.

Student Objectives

Students will

- Read and discuss multicultural literature in a meaningful, complex manner
- Become familiar with how genre and historical context are used to interpret texts
- Discover how to compare and contrast texts to uncover their intertextual links
- Develop ideas in verbal and written form
- Learn how literature and art can be used to express inspiring visions of freedom and liberty

Resources

- Myths, Folktales, & Fairy Tales

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- Faith Ringgold website
- Virginia Hamilton website
- *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold (New York: Crown, 1991)
- *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985)
- Chart paper
- Interactive Venn diagram

Instructional Plan

Preparation

1. Read *Tar Beach* and the afterword included in the text.
2. Read the introduction to the folktale anthology, The People Could Fly, the folktale with the same name as the anthology, *The People Could Fly,* and the brief afterword that accompanies the tale.
3. Look at Faith Ringgold's website and Virginia Hamilton's website to obtain some background information about both authors and their work. This background information can be used for a number of different purposes, particularly during Session 1.

Session 1: Introduction to the texts

Show the class a copy of *Tar Beach* and explain that it is a picture book written by Faith Ringgold. Provide a brief introduction to Ringgold's background and work. Show the class a copy of *The People Could Fly* and explain that it is an anthology of folktales. Familiarize students with the folktale genre; the website Myths, Folktales, & Fairy Tales developed by Scholastic is an excellent resource. Provide a brief introduction to Hamilton's background and work. This introduction to the authors' lives and their work enables students to see how issues discussed in the texts are connected to the authors' own struggles and achievements.

Tell students that they are going to read the story *The People Could Fly* from Hamilton's anthology, as well as *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold to explore the similarities and differences between the two texts. Have students read both stories, as well as the afterword that accompany the stories. The stories and afterwords can be read in class or at home, depending on the reading level of students and the structure of available lesson time. Here are some possible options for organizing the reading assignments:

- students read one author's work in class and the other author's work at home
- students read both stories in class, and both afterwords at home
- students spend one class session reading Ringold's work and another class session reading Hamilton's work, and then read the afterwords as homework on the appropriate day

Session 2: Linking and comparing the texts

Separate students into small groups, and have them discuss the similarities and differences between Cassie in *Tar Beach* and Toby in *The People Could Fly*. If students are familiar with Venn diagrams, have each group use the interactive Venn diagram to create one that depicts the ways Cassie and Toby are the same and the ways they are different. If students are not familiar with Venn diagrams, have each group make a simple chart with Cassie and Toby's similarities in one column, and their differences in another

column.

Bring the whole class together, and have representatives from each group report the results of their group discussion and display their Venn diagrams or charts. Summarize the students' findings by writing the differences and similarities most often noted by all of the groups on diagram or chart paper.

Session 3: Expanding and deepening initial observations

Separate students into their small groups again, and have them discuss the following 4 pairs of questions, which build on work done in the previous lesson and enable students to move from a literal to a more abstract level of interpretation.

1. Why does Cassie want to fly? What does Cassie's flying help her to do?
2. Why does Toby want to fly? What does Toby's flying help him to do?
3. What would happen if Cassie couldn't fly? What would happen if Toby couldn't fly?
4. In what ways are Cassie's reasons for flying different than Toby's reasons? In what ways are Cassie's reasons for flying the same as Toby's reasons?

Each group should discuss all four pairs of questions together, and then select one pair of questions to prepare an in-depth answer. Bring the whole class together, and have a representative from each group present the group's answers to the one pair of questions that they selected. Summarize and record the groups' answers on diagram or chart paper.

Extension

Print out Faith Ringgold's song *Anyone Can Fly* from her Internet site, and distribute copies to students. Have them read the words of the song and go online to her website to hear it sung. Then have students work in groups to discuss the following questions and answer them in essay format.

1. What would the characters in *Tar Beach* think of the song?
2. What would the characters in *The People Could Fly* think of the song?
3. How is the song relevant to the characters' lives?
4. What do you think of the song?
5. How is it relevant to your life?

Student Assessment/Reflections

Reflective essays. Allow students to choose one of the following questions to answer in essay format. Explain that students can refer to the diagram or chart paper that was used to record their answers to the discussion questions from previous sessions. Feel free to choose a selection of questions from this list or modify the questions to best suit your students.

1. Compare and contrast *Tar Beach* and *The People Could Fly*. How are they similar? How are they different?
2. If Toby and Cassie could talk to one another, what would they tell each other? What would Toby tell Cassie? What would Cassie tell Toby?

3. In her dedication to *Tar Beach,* Faith Ringgold says that her three grandchildren, Faith, Theodora, and Martha, "are all strong readers and can fly." What does Faith Ringgold mean when she says this? How is reading related to flying? Do you think her grandchildren fly for the same reasons as Cassie or Toby fly or do you think they fly for different reasons? Do you ever "fly" when you are reading?

4. Why does Cassie want to fly over the Union building? What does Cassie say will happen when she flies over the Union building? Why does Toby want to fly away from the driver? What happens when Toby says the "ancient words"? How are Cassie's reasons for flying over the Union building similar to Toby's reasons for flying away from the driver? How are their reasons different?

5. Cassie and Toby both help other people to fly. Who does Cassie help and who does Toby help? How does Cassie teach flying? How does Toby teach flying? Is it important to both of them to help other people fly, as well as help themselves?

6. Where do you think Toby flies to after the end of the story? Where do you think Cassie flies after the Union building and the Ice Cream Factory?

7. Where would you fly, if you could fly like Cassie and Toby? What would be your reasons for flying? How would flying change your life?

Interpretive drawing. Student understanding of the text can be assessed through drawing as well as writing. A few of the essay questions noted above can be adapted for the drawing option.

Question 2. If Toby and Cassie could draw pictures for each other, what would they draw? What would they want to show each other about their lives? Pretend you are Toby and draw a picture for Cassie illustrating something important about flying or pretend you are Cassie and draw a picture for Toby.

Question 6. Include a drawing that illustrates your answer to this question.

Question 7. Include a drawing that illustrates your answer to this question.

IRA/NCTE Standards

1 - Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

2 - Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss

print and nonprint texts.

12 - Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

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